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ABSTRACT

The digest excerpts major points of the report of the Council for Exceptional Children's Ad Hoc Committee to Study and Respond to the 1983 Report of the National Commission on Excellence in Education. The committee also examined the reports of the Education Commission of the States, the Twentieth Century Fund, and the Carnegie Council. General concerns cited included the reports' lack of recognition of exceptional children and special education, and the need to evaluate excellence in terms of the learner's individuality. The dangers of using singular standards for assessing achievement in exceptional students are considered, and the committee asserts that a system of singular criteria for curricula and assessment to determine competence, graduation, or program evaluation is immoral as well as poor educational practice. The committee further suggests caution in interpreting the reports' calls for firm discipline. The importance of the individual professional educator's role in achieving excellence in education is stressed. The digest concludes with a list of ways in which the federal government should support greater excellence in exceptional child education. (CL)

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Clearinghouse on Handicapped and Gifted Children
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THE IMPERATIVE FOR EDUCATIONAL REFORM: IMPLICATIONS FOR SPECIAL EDUCATION

This ERIC Digest excerpts major points of the Report of the CEC Ad Hoc Committee to Study and Respond to the 1983 Report of the National Commission on Excellence in Education. The committee also considered the reports of The Education Commission of the States (ECS), the Twentieth Century Fund, and the Carnegie Council in preparing its response. The full report of the Ad Hoc Committee is published in *Exceptional Children*, Vol. 50, No. 6, pp. 484-494. Members of the CEC Ad Hoc Committee include: Leo Cain, Chairperson; John Meicher, Member; Beverly Johns, Member; Judy Ashmore, Member; Carolyn Callahan, Member; Ingrid Draper, Member; Peter Beveridge, Canadian Consultant; and Fred Weintraub, CEC Staff Liaison.

What General Concerns Exist Among Special Educators Regarding These Reports?

We are greatly concerned that the reports generally fail to recognize exceptional children and youth, their special educational needs, and the role of special education and special educators within the schools. Recommendations pertaining to exceptional children or special education tend to be presented as an afterthought which we believe to be reflective of a philosophy of excellence which fails to recognize the diversity of learners in our schools.

The challenge is to find ways in which we can view excellence within the parameters of diversity of population and future orientation. A system of education which acknowledges the individuality of learning must also recognize that educational programs must be individually determined, planned, and implemented within the constructs of each student's instructional needs. Further, our systems for evaluating excellence must recognize the individuality of the learner and reward and celebrate all learning that is achieved. Such a view thus requires us to study the manner in which schools formulate individualized plans for learning and the degree to which such learning is accomplished. Excellence then becomes individually defined through a common process of assessment, planning, and evaluation. Such a definition would permit strict accountability, while recognizing the diversity of learners which is our greatest national strength, and developing the future orientation we so urgently need.

What are the Hazards of Using Singular Standards for Assessing Achievement in Exceptional Students?

The reports call for more demanding requirements for grading and urge that grades be reliable indicators of student readiness for further study. Support is given for increased standardized testing to certify student credentials and identify the need for remediation and enrichment. Promotion, grouping, and graduation should be based on academic progress and mastery rather than age.

We believe that the goals and objectives of education should be clear and that educators and students and their families should have varying levels of accountability for their attainment. However, we strongly oppose singular standards to measure achievement. The abilities of our students vary greatly, and curricula and assessment must relate to such variability. For example, a severely retarded youth may have been an excellent learner and achieved all that could be expected in terms of his or her own ability and individual curriculum, may be prepared to be a functioning member of the community, yet be unable to pass a competency test or meet singular standards for graduation. On the other hand, a gifted youth may enter school with many skills, go through school learning very little in terms of his or her ability or curricular needs, and still be able to pass a competency test and meet the standards for graduation. The first student represents the educational excellence we all strive for, yet, because of a single standard of excellence, is judged a failure and relegated to second-class educational status. The second student represents the educational failure we should prevent, but based on a singular standard, we deem his or her education to be one of excellence and thus confer the trappings of competence and graduation. We believe that such a system of singular criteria for curricula and assessment to determine competence, graduation, or program evaluation is immoral, poor educational practice, a violation of student and societal needs, and contrary to the fundamental tenets of our society.

We believe that efforts to improve curricula and methods to assess the acquisition of required skills and knowledge must reflect the diversity of the educational needs of students. Further, measures of achievement and competency must reflect individually determined curricula which the student has been given reasonable opportunity to master. Graduation, including a diploma, should be granted to all students who satisfactorily complete their individually determined curricula.

What Cautions Need to be Considered in Interpreting the Call for Firm Discipline?

While we support the need for improved discipline, we are concerned that disciplinary procedures might be used, as they have been in the past, as a means of excluding from school or even from educational opportunities, students the school does not wish to educate. While exceptional students should generally be expected to adhere to the school's standards of conduct, certain students may not be capable of meeting some standards; interventions should be provided to assist such students to learn the appropriate behaviors, while also

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assuring other students and faculty a safe and productive learning environment. Further, we believe that under no circumstances should a student be denied educational opportunity. While a student may need to be moved, with procedural fairness, to other environments, education must still be available to that student.

We believe that efforts to establish and reinforce standards of conduct in schools are an important component of creating productive learning environments. We support such efforts as long as they take into consideration the unique needs of some exceptional students and are not used to deny educational opportunity to students.

How Can Educators Move Toward Greater Excellence and Professional Status?

We believe that the varying professions within education must assume leadership in establishing standards for personnel preparation programs within their profession. We believe such standards should be used by national and state accrediting agencies and by funding agencies to evaluate programs. If educators are to be truly professionals, then each of their professions must have some influence over the criteria that determine who shall practice their profession.

If education is to attract and maintain the most competent persons, then salaries must become competitive with other professions. Any professional should support periodic evaluation by his or her professional colleagues. Such evaluation should have as its primary purpose the improvement of practice and, if necessary, the guidance of persons into other careers. We believe that all educators, including administrators, could benefit from such evaluations. We are concerned about the concept of merit pay, because it labels professionals as either meritorious or nonmeritorious. Special educators must have a high level of mutual trust and respect with the students and parents they serve. The anxieties of parents regarding their exceptional students, the individualization of instruction, and the high level of parental involvement in decision making would make it impossible for a professional deemed "nonmeritorious" to function. If professionals are not capable of effectively practicing their profession, then they should be counseled and assisted into other careers.

We believe the individual professional educator is the critical ingredient for achieving excellence in education. Our society can expect excellence from such professionals only if it is willing to treat them as professionals, remunerate them accordingly, provide them with the tools and conditions necessary to practice their profession, and assure them the opportunity to continue their professional development.

What Role Should the Federal Government Play in Supporting Greater Excellence in Exceptional Child Education?

We believe the following are essentials the federal government must be committed to:

- Maintaining and improving its commitment to assure all handicapped children and youth access to a free appropriate public education as represented by the Education for All Handicapped Children Act (P.L. 94-142) and Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973.
- Maintaining and further developing its fiscal partnership with state and local governments to assure that all Americans, including exceptional persons, receive the quality education that is essential for their self-development and the well-being of our nation.
- Assuring that handicapped children (from as early as birth) and their families have available the early intervention services that they require.
- Making available the career preparation and vocational training needed to enable handicapped children and young adults to become self-supporting, taxpaying citizens.
- Promoting equal and appropriate participation by handicapped persons within a variety of federally supported lifelong learning activities.
- Assuming a leadership role in advancing the education of gifted and talented children and youth.
- Playing a major role in improving the quality of education for exceptional persons by fiscally and programmatically supporting the preparation of well-trained professional educators, assisting in the continuing education of teachers and other professional personnel, and maintaining and strengthening the federal role in research, demonstration, information, technology, and other essential systems for supporting change.

RESOURCES

A Nation at Risk: The Imperative for Educational Reform. A Report to the Nation and the Secretary of Education, United States Department of Education, by The National Commission on Excellence in Education, April 1983, is available from the Superintendent of Documents, U.S. Government Printing Office, Washington, D.C. 20402. Stock No. 065-000-00177-2. Price $4.50 per copy.

ERIC Short Report. *Professional Standards in Special Education.* 1983.

Aiming at Excellence: A Comparison of the School Effectiveness Literature and Special Education Practice. 1982. ED 218743.

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